

Red Mass - Diocese of Allentown

I. Introduction

Two weeks ago, I was lining up with all the other bishops to enter St. Theresa Church in Trumbull, Connecticut, for the installation of my successor as Bishop of Bridgeport when I received an urgent email. It was from my communications director in Baltimore. He said the Pope had given an interview to *America* magazine, that it was a “must-read” and that I might be asked by the media for comment.

Well, as you know, the Church frowns on emailing and texting during Mass, so there was nothing for me to do but offer a little prayer to the Holy Spirit and then to tend to the matter at hand - namely - praying that God would bless abundantly the Diocese of Bridgeport and its new Bishop, the Most Reverend Frank Caggiano. Emails, even one with the Pope’s interview attached, would have to wait.

By the time I reached the train station for the return trip to Baltimore, however, I realized how urgently I needed to read the Pope’s interview, to study it and reflect upon it. I say this because at the train station I met a medical doctor whom I had known during my years as Bishop of Bridgeport. He had already read about the interview and concluded that the Pope was backing away from the Church’s teaching on the sanctity of life, religious freedom, and the defense of marriage. “Isn’t it wonderful?” he said, as my heart sank and as I began to marshal my thoughts.

II. What Pope Francis Wants Us to Know

Reading the interview on the train and responding to media calls, I realized what Pope Francis, in his now-famous interview, is saying to the world, and what the Scriptures are saying to us gathered for this annual Red Mass. Pope Francis, in his very creative and engaging way, is telling us to put first things first. He is telling me as a bishop and you as faithful Catholics who are involved in law and in the administration of justice to put first things first.

But what comes first in our lives? What is the overarching priority that helps us put our spiritual lives, our personal lives, our vocations, and our professional life in focus? What gives meaning to how we live, to what we say, and what we do?

What outranks everything is falling in love with God. We have gathered to invoke the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit who pours forth the love of God into our hearts. We have gathered to place ourselves under the influence of the Holy Spirit who enables us to encounter Christ, not as a remote figure of history, but as our Redeemer who lives, who reigns, who is present in our hearts, and who seeks to lead us to share deeply in his Father's love. Commenting on today's reading from St. Paul's to the Romans, Pope Francis says this: "It is the Spirit himself whom we received in Baptism, who teaches us, who spurs us to say to God, 'Father' or rather, 'Abba!' which means 'Papa' or 'Dad'... ..The Holy Spirit creates within us this new condition as children of God and this is the greatest gift we have received from the paschal mystery of Jesus."

Dear friends, On the first Pentecost, Peter declared to the crowds, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the Holy Spirit" (AA 2:38). The Holy Spirit not only links us to Christ but makes the reality of his death and resurrection come alive in us, so much so, that we can say with St. Paul, 'it's no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me'. Through the Holy Spirit the redeeming love of Christ who died for our sins overtakes our minds and hearts and transforms us so thoroughly that God the Father in heaven can see and love in us what he sees and loves in Christ.

In Confirmation the presence of the Holy Spirit and his gifts were deepened. Through the prayer of the Church, the laying on of hands, & the anointing with chrism, the gifts of the Holy Spirit were impressed more deeply upon souls: "a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord." In this way, the faith implanted in our hearts at baptism was given what it needs to grow, develop, and mature. Faith becomes a way of seeing ourselves and our lives as God sees; a way of judging as God would judge; a way of loving as he would love.

Through the sacraments God makes his presence and his gifts unfailingly available. Yet, the task of living as the Lord's disciples and walking the way of salvation is anything but automatic - for, as St. Augustine once said - "Without God I can't. Without me God's won't." God doesn't save us against our will. Part of our human dignity consists in this, that with God's grace, we can indeed choose to move

ourselves toward God and toward the salvation that he desires for us.

And once we make this our first priority, everything else in our lives changes. Then it is that we unlock the power of gifts God has been giving us in the sacraments throughout our lives, from the day of our Baptism, at our Confirmation, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, in the worthy reception of Holy Communion. Once we respond to God's love and delve more deeply into his love, then it is no longer burdensome to let his truth guide our decisions; following the Commandments becomes a response of love, for as Jesus says in today's Gospel, "if you love me, you will keep my commandments." When God's love reigns in us through the Holy Spirit, our personal lives will be marked by a new peace and joy; and our professional lives will be marked by a newfound wisdom and courage, including on matters such as the protection of innocent human life, the defense of marriage as between one man and one woman, and the protection of the precious God-given gift of religious freedom.

III. Apostolate of Personal Influence

As members of the bench and bar, as leaders in your communities, each of you has a network of colleagues and friends – You influence others by what you think, say, and do. If we were to ask Blessed John Henry Newman how we might allow the Holy Spirit to assist us in daily bearing witness to the Lord's truth and love, he would advise us to pursue what he called "the apostolate of personal influence." A convert to the Catholic faith, Newman himself was enormously influential in the 19th century through his writings, his sermons, and the sanctity of his life. What would Cardinal Newman say to us?

First, he would tell us that our faith must be real, not just a set of ideas. Second, our faith must be deeply personal, to echo his motto, "heart speaks to heart". God's heart speaks to our hearts 'words of spirit and life', words of truth and love, which penetrate to our depths such that, when they hit home, they cannot be suppressed. And third, if our hearts are to speak to the hearts of others, then there must be a distinguishing quality about our lives, "an undertone of truth", a life of integrity and virtue, rooted in deep convictions about the way things are, illumined by the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5).

This includes the wisdom, the understanding, the good judgment and courage to

uphold human dignity throughout the spectrum of life, to work for the common good and not just private interests, to protect robustly the gift of human freedom, including religious freedom, granted to us not by the generosity of the government but by the hand of God, to never forget the needs of the poor and disadvantaged in our midst, to foster and protect intermediate structures in society such as the family, schools, and religious institutions which stand between the individual conscience and the power of the state. How important that citizens continue to be allowed not only to worship as they see fit but also sustain religiously based educational, healthcare, and charitable institutions which, in every way, reflect the faith that inspired their creation in the first place.

IV. Conclusion

How grateful we should be to Pope Francis for his spirit of prayer, for his life of Gospel simplicity, for his evident joy - which is winning a new hearing of the Gospel in our day and age. Prompted by his example and inspired by the Holy Spirit, may we follow Christ unreservedly. May we be the full-time Christians Pope Francis challenges us to be - Christians at church and at home, but also Christians at our places of work and with our colleagues... Christians on Sunday as well as the other six days of the week. And may our lives be an open invitation to those around us to open their hearts to God's truth and love.

Joining my voice to Bishop Barros, I sincerely thank you for your witness to the faith and for your spirit of service to both Church and State, even as I join him also in asking God to bless you and keep you in His love.